

ORAL HISTORY 440

INTERVIEWEE: Senator John Sherman Cooper

Cates: Hugh Cates. It's April the 29th, 1971. I'm in the office of United States Senator John Sherman Cooper. Senator Cooper is a Republican from the state of Kentucky. Senator Cooper, would you mind just stating some of your recollections or impressions of the late Senator Richard Brevard Russell?

Cooper: I first met Senator Russell in 1947 when I came to the Senate for a two-year term. I was defeated twice. I've been back in the Senate several times. I served for 15 years. I knew him like all Senators knew him, from observing him on the Floor of the Senate, admiring him for his dignity, for his presence, his authority and his tremendous power and influence in debate. I'll just say commonplace, but it is correct that he's always considered as an outstanding power, force in the Senate.

Cates: Senator, excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt you, sir, go ahead, sir.

Cooper: He was often...I remember the first...when I first came here he was very courteous to me. He was always very courteous to people. He would listen to their views, unless he...at times he would get a little irritated because they were so...he could tell he thought they were very prejudiced or biased in their views and were not objective. I was much interested in defense matters having served two years on the Armed Services Committee in '53 and '54. When, after development of sophisticated nuclear weapons where it is so difficult to understand what all these weapons were about, when you were not on the Committee. I would ask him, when he was

Chairman, if I could come to the sessions when Secretary of Defense gave to the Committee his estimate of the defense situations sometimes lasting two or three days. He was always kind, always asked me to come in, and was very grateful for that. I assume the...the period in which I had the closest relationship with him was when both of us served as a...members of the Commission to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy, which, of course, was more popularly known as the Warren Commission. In that year I did get-- 1964--to know him well and to see him in action and in thought.

Cates: Senator, could you comment in certain areas of this investigation maybe something that might throw a little insight into the character of Senator Russell?

Cooper: Yes. That investigation lasted several months in 1964. He was also busy in the Senate. It was an election year, and the investigation took a great deal of time of the members. There were dozens of witnesses, dozens and dozens and dozens of papers we had to read, testimony given by other witnesses which were taken by members of the staff. And then the Commission met often. Our final judgment was unanimous but in making that judgment there were discussions which brought out the strength of mind, the judgment and authority of Senator Russell. If you want me to tell you some of them I can.

Cates: Senator, I wish you would and I might say this and I don't know if it would go into this area or not, but if you feel like if anything you might say should not be made public for some time you can so state that and a time seal would be put on it. And it would be honored by the University of Georgia.

Cooper: No, this is perfectly all right.

Cates: Well, I wish you would go...

Cooper: Most of it's public knowledge...

Cates: I wish you...

Cooper: What is it, I don't think, do not think anyone would affect the findings of the Commission.

Cates: Well, using...

Cooper: But I would say first, Senator Russell did not want to go on the Commission. I...I...I think you would like to know...

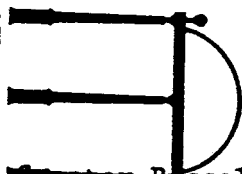
Cates: Yes.

Cooper: Personal things.

Cates: Well, I want you to use your own good judgment in saying anything you want to in this area.

Cooper: I remember when President Johnson called me at my hometown in Somerset, Kentucky, where I had left for the weekend and asked me to be on the Commission, and he told me that Senator Russell would be the Democratic member from the Senate. That led me, very persuasively to also be a member of the Commission, because I appreciated his position and his judgment. Senator Russell later told me that he objected very strongly to going on the Commission. He was very busy and also, to be frank, he said he did not care to serve under Justice [Earl Warren]. But as always, his sense of duty and I think patriotism and it was deep in him, led him, as he told me

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to override any personal feelings and do what he thought the President wanted him to do and do what he thought ought to be done for the country. And it... I...I...I...that was one of his great qualities, to rise to what he thought was the need of the country. On the Commission, which was made up of a... four from the Congress, two from the House and two from the Senate—two Republicans, two Democrats—and Senator Russell and myself from the Senate, Congressman Boggs and Congressman Ford from the House—and then a distinguished group of civilians, private members, headed... and then headed by Chief Justice Warren. As a group we had no preconceived notions. We differed in many ways and we did go over testimony and work to come to, if we could, a common judgment. But there's...there were two issues in that investigation which again impressed me about Senator Russell. And first may I say, he kept up with that investigation all the time. Even if he had committees which he had to attend, he had a representative there and staff and when he came back you could tell that he had read the evidence. He talked over all the facts. He knew what had been done even when he wasn't there. First, there was the testimony of Mrs. [Lee Harvey] Oswald, the wife and widow of Lee Oswald. And when we heard her testimony, the first and the second time, she was bereft and...and, of course, a tragedy for her. And I think she attracted some sympathy from the Commission. Well, of course, that sympathy would be human nature. But Senator Russell, he was not convinced that she had told the full truth and all the facts she did know. And he talked to me about it. I had somewhat of the same feeling, but again I must say he was the leader...took the leadership in it. And he said...he suggested that we go down to Dallas, Texas and have her as a witness there. And we would question her again. And we did go. I think we were there two days and on those two days we questioned

her very strenuously and his was the most powerful examination. He was courteous, dignified, but nevertheless he searched for the truth. I will say that we did not get from her any additional information, but I always believed that Senator Russell thought that she had some fact, not necessarily that...that it was anyone else but Lee Oswald responsible, but...but that he had some feeling that she had not told all the facts. I think that was born out in a statement he made a year or so ago in which he said, as I recall, he had not yet been persuaded that we had all the facts. The most compelling position he took in the Commission was this: there was a question of whether or not the shot which struck President Kennedy or one of the shots, had...had passed through Governor John Connally of Texas on the front seat. To...to find that it had passed through both would make the decision somewhat easier in the time frame. It wasn't conclusive. And so there was first...an opinion by most of the Commission that we should say that the shot passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. Governor Connally was a very strong witness. I see now why he has the present opinion in the country that he's a very strong man. He's a very strong witness. He said categorically that he knew it...that the first shot did not pass through him. And he...I remember he said, "I turned my head when I heard the shot. It did come from the direction which you have decided it came from because I'm familiar with firearms. But as I turned again to the left, I felt the impact of another shot." Senator Russell just said, "I'll never sign that report if...if...if this Commission says categorically that the second shot passed through both of them. I agreed with him. I must say he had great influence with me, but I too have been impressed by Governor Connally and so the Commission then did agree that, I cannot recall the exact words, that while there was evidence

that the same...that the shot had passed through both President Kennedy and... and Governor Connally it was not conclusive. And with that, why, Senator Russell won his point. I think he's correct. The other point was at the end, and this was more a matter of language than of decision because everyone had agreed that from all the evidence we had, that we could find only one person who was...who was a...could be charged with the assassination of President Kennedy and that was Lee Oswald. And...but again, there was the first categorical statement that Lee Oswald was the assassin, no one else was connected with it, and again Senator Russell said, "I agree wholly on the facts before us. But, we are not...we...we...we're not...we cannot say that at some point there may be some other evidence in the future and that we cannot categorically close the door to the facts that may arise. He just said, "I want to limit to what we have ourselves heard, we've searched out all we could, done the best we could and on the basis of that we say that Lee Oswald was the assassin but we must not...we must say also that there may be facts which are developed in the future but which we could not secure which may show otherwise." Now, that last is probably what was just...said, well, anybody could have said that but taking in consideration his...his determination to interview Mrs. Oswald, the third time and very strongly, and his strong position on the question of whether the same shot passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally, I just feel there to show the strength of his mind, the careful judgment about testimony, the limits...precise limits, upon which we could base our judgment, that is on what we had heard, it was an indication of the...of the capable, capable, able, and capable man of a very strong mind, of a very discriminating mind, of a powerful determination to be just, and I came out of that six or seven months work feeling that he had been associated with a man who was more...certainly more able and powerful than anyone else on that Commission. And, well, and I thought more than anyone I'd known in

the Senate.

Cates: Senator Cooper, did he have any private conversations with you about this aspect of a possible communist conspiracy, anything that you could divulge at this time?

Cooper: No, I think we...we...mentioned that in our report. We found no evidence of that at all. No, he never did...he never did...he never did give any strength to that idea.

Cates: Do you feel like perhaps the reason that President Johnson wanted Russell on that Commission was that he had so much confidence in Russell that he felt like that it was almost like having himself on the Commission?

Cooper: Oh, yes, he wanted him on there I'm sure first because of his... he knew his powerful mind and good judgment. And also I'm sure because he believed that...that with Senator Russell's presence on the Committee it would give great credibility to the work and decision of the Commission. You know the Commission was attached and all kinds of...of statements were made about its work and...and I talked to him about that from time to time, and he would kind of laugh about that and say, "Well, I read what those men have said, three or four of them," but he said, "They didn't make any independent investigation of their own, they just took our work, the Commission's work, and picked holes in it." And now he had...he had such good sense, good judgment, such fairness, too.

Cates: Senator Cooper, this is an excellent example of how you worked with Senator Russell. The two of you working together on a project. Can you recall anything else that comes to mind at this time of how you might have worked together in the Senate? I notice that at one time you're...maybe